

GIVING FROM THE HEART

(Rev. Arlin Roy, 2/23/25)

Today I am going to talk about the effect our current political climate is having on us, but not about politics. There is a certain arrogant bullying abroad in the land, and people of faith can feel great distress at seeing it and feeling helpless to stop in themselves. A reactive antagonism, however, is only worsening the social climate. Today I will be talking about self-preservation and Love, self-compassion and compassion for others.

The post I read to you earlier was put out on Jan. 31, 2025, eleven days into the new presidency, a timing that is significant. As a response to the vicious attack on normalcy, it suggests ways to hunker down and find a center you can live with through reference to what dying people found significant in their last days. Find joy in the ordinary. Don't fret over the small stuff. Consider what you've left unresolved. Here's another list, from The Rev. Kimberley Debus, a UU minister in the D.C. area. She noted in her piece entitled "It's all too much" that she and others were feeling great stress producing frayed nerves, panic, withdrawal, and prickliness. She quotes sociologist Jennifer Walter recommending:

1. Set boundaries: Pick two-three key issues you deeply care about and focus your attention there. You can't track everything—that's by design. Impact comes from sustained focus, not scattered awareness.

2. Step down media intake—watching news too much? Listen. Listening too much? Read. Find trusted analysts who do the heavy lifting of synthesis.
3. Practice going slow. Wait 48 hours before reacting. . . .
4. Build community: Share the cognitive load . . .

And so on. Google Kimberley Debus or Jennifer Walter for the full list. These pieces strike me as well-meaning suggestions for self-management under duress. I don't have any complaints about them—as far as they go. These are all techniques that help us survive the battering of deliberate attempts by Steve Bannon, Elon Musk, and Donald Trump to shockingly overwhelm normal people with stress. We saw fascism coming and it came and keeps on coming. All of the president's assaults on due process, the legal system, and compassion loaded on top of a normal life's troubles and conflicts can easily produce disorganized dismay. A normal reaction is, at first, to let go of the external and go inward to cultivate your spiritual walled garden.

I am interested in anything that promises insights for pastoral care, and therefore picked up on the New York Times “Well” article (and I quote): “I am not Pollyanna; I'm a big academic,” said Dr. Vicki Jackson, who has treated dying patients for a quarter century, “But I tell people I appreciate them a lot. I have a lot of deep gratitude, because I know it is dumb luck that it's not me in that bed.” And further: “Dr. Jackson makes a point not to stew over minor frustrations. If

someone cuts her off in traffic, she will ask herself, “Do I really want to spend that 15 minutes of my life giving it over to that guy?” By the way, I admit that I can—at a distance and without testing them objectively-- negatively evaluate the intelligence of someone who cuts me off in traffic, but it is over in 10 seconds. Dr. Jackson can clearly carry a hard grudge. Any good therapist will tell you that taking a larger perspective on your life and maintaining personal boundaries are good traits to help you get through the day. Or consider this, from (and I quote) “Dr Bethany Snider, chief medical officer of a nonprofit hospice in Kentucky and Indiana, [who] told me she frequently asks patients, “What have you left undone?” This question can also apply to your life now, she said.

Maybe there’s a relationship you’ve always wanted to repair, or something you always wanted to do or see.” Remember that movie, THE BUCKET LIST? Two very different terminally ill characters played by Jack Nickolson and Morgan Freeman joined forces to do and see what they had wanted to do for a long time but had put off. The pursuit of said adventures—besides the gratification of wishes satisfied—gave them an enhanced appreciation for each other and for love itself. Yes, as Dr. Snider says about wishes left unresolved, “it is important to have goals in life.” Finding joy in the ordinary, relativizing little problems, and resolving the previously unresolved are also pretty good pieces of advice.

Think about this—on a scale of zero to ten, how important are these insights for you? We have reviewed things I might recommend to a client for enhanced self-management, to reduce stress and reinforce their purpose in life. I am now going to ask you to commit yourself, just for the moment, to how significant these are for you right now. On a scale of not-much to very helpful, zero to ten, raise your hand if they come land for you in approximately the range of 1-3 . . . 4-6 . . . or 7-10. OK, you're off the hook, but if you wondered if perhaps, I was setting you up, you were half right.

I was asking for a commitment because I want us to self-consciously think about purpose in the face of negativity. We need to go deeper than self-management techniques and traits. Part of what afflicts us now can be recognized as parallels to fascism in Europe at the middle of the last century. Truly heroic people stood up to the Nazis in many ways and saved thousands of people from persecution. And remember the references to the Freedom Riders from our last service, when truly heroic people invaded the South to force Justice on a population afflicted by violent, prejudiced organizations and people—with the Love of applied nonviolence. In times of oppression, there have been many people who endured the Nazis and the Jim Crow South through keeping their focus on love, on loving themselves enough to love others constructively when they got the chance. Those were the people who sheltered refugees within and without

Germany in the 30's and 40's. Those were the people who sheltered refugees from the civil rights struggle.

I knew one such couple in Minneapolis, the Tilsens, who took in a young woman after the Klan burned her out of her home in Alabama. They provided her with the means to get a college education and write an award-winning play. For another example, I have contributed to Amnesty International for decades, but when on Friday they sent me a bumper sticker saying "Fighting BAD GUYS Since 1961, Amnesty International," I could not put such an angrily provocative sticker on my car. I think they've been distracted by the rampant anxiety and negativity currently flooding our media. I will continue to support Amnesty, but not out of contentious resentment. Only a commitment to give from the heart will sustain us going forward.

Giving from the heart is about opening up space for dialogue. Nonviolent love is about persuading people who don't agree, or who don't quite agree, that there are other reasonable options to their way of thinking. Pushing back at obnoxious people who are foisting opinions on us is tempting but illusory. Nothing is accomplished. It is Dr. Vicki Jackson holding a fifteen-minute grudge after being cut off in traffic. Giving from the heart won't always work as we might like, it won't even **usually** work, but then we have not furthered an antagonistic social context. We have preserved an area of dialogue possibilities that might bear

fruit a week or month later. And we have remained true to a larger vision of good feeling between people. We have stood with Love in the marketplace of ideas and refused to be emotionally brutal like many around us, and that will not go unnoticed. Giving from the heart preserves who we are despite verbal assault. That is powerful, even if sometimes risky.

First, giving from the heart involves risk. That risk may be merely that when we listen responsively the other person cannot own their true feelings. Noticing that an arrogant or angry person is probably hurt, sad, or fearful underneath isn't always going to be welcomed. Or it could be an unexpected encounter, such as occurred during a recent trip to Puerto Rico. Sarita and I had just set up our beach chairs and towels at a lovely beach—bright sun, rolling waves, smooth sand--when a skinny White guy set up his chair next to us. We politely acknowledged him with “Hi, How're you doin'” and were greeted with a strident: “Now that we're not trying to take care of the whole world, I'm great!”

We just looked at him blankly, probably because 1) That's an invitation to verbal fighting we didn't want to take, and 2) we hadn't seen the news that Trump had eviscerated US Aid to International Development. I have had several of these encounters lately, when it seemed some pretty desperate characters were verbally aggressive about politics. This is a new development in social interaction, and not a good one. If I had had my wits about me, I would have responded with empathy

for his feeling burdened that America has helped so many other countries. But not pushing back is at least not maintaining an atmosphere of division, something that corrects the current social climate.

That risk of awkward, angering interaction is more likely now than previously. Giving from the heart involves trying to find some common ground, such as recognizing that someone's motives may be fine, but we differ about the means to make things better. It might be recognizing, for example, that the Israeli's have suffered badly from Hamas, but that also that innocent Gazans have suffered horribly. As an Episcopal priest said to me recently, "I will go to a memorial service for both Israelis and Palestinians." Or it is an exchange I had recently with a man who said:

"They're rooting out waste and fraud! Fifty million dollars for condoms to Mozambique!"

I responded with: "How do you feel about that?"

He said: "I feel reassured my money is safe."

I said: "I am sad and fearful for the both of us, when I hear untrue claims about U.S. aid. The Israel Times said it was fifty million dollars in aid for the Gaza Strip."

Maybe giving from the heart is about a common humanity, regardless of labels or sides.

And sometimes the risk is too great. I was the only American in a Finnish folk school, kind of a community college, during my third year in an American college. There were maybe 75 Finns and myself there. I was doing OK socially, given the little Finnish I spoke, and there were a few people to hang with. There was a Finnish student there who was very shy, clearly wary and didn't make friends. He was always alone. He walked in an odd, jerky gait and was usually withdrawn, but sometimes he wanted to talk. I'd say hello but I couldn't carry much of a conversation yet, in Finnish. I still feel badly that I could not convey to the head of the school that he was in trouble and needed help. I didn't have the words for it, nor the authority, and the severe school principal was not psychologically minded. Sometimes the context for love limits its effectiveness.

This is where self-compassion comes in. Often derided as a pity party, self-compassion is understanding that we are all limited, flawed, and incomplete. That's just the way it is, it is not an imposition on others. Unlike the self-righteous claims of unfairness by current presidential appointees about too much federal money going to airline safety and protecting consumers, self-compassion is a relative freedom from shame to recognize that you've experienced suffering, but you are being kind to yourself in that moment. Self-compassion is a practice of

goodwill, not necessarily good feelings. We're not trying to make bad feelings go away or pretend they aren't there. Self-compassion is just holding loving space for ourselves when we feel negative emotions. Self-compassion activates regions of positive affect in the brain, and that increases empathy and resilience, to decrease stress. All of that self-compassion protects our hearts, literally and metaphorically.

Self-compassion is the antidote to the poisonous stress being spewed out of Washington right now, counteracting emotional reactivity and exhaustion that can lead to burnout because we feel such pain for those unjustly fired from the federal workforce. Trump and Musk's pompous posturing and bullying elicit dismay, discouragement, and rage. Their behaviors wear us out by stimulating a helpless reactivity. But we are not helpless to be loving in our lives. We are powerful in our connectedness to each other, when we give from the heart.

Here's what Marshall Rosenberg says:

When we give from the heart, we do so out of a joy that springs forth whenever we willingly enrich another person's life. This kind of giving benefits both the giver and the receiver. The receiver enjoys the gift without worrying about the consequences that accompany gifts given out of fear, guilt, shame, or desire for gain. The giver benefits from the enhanced self-esteem that results when we see our efforts contributing to someone's well-being. (Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication, pg.5)

I understand that, by itself, this could be a kind of quietism—retreating into one's inner life so that there is a defensive disengagement from the world. That is also not necessary. Recently, I said that Sarita and I would show up occasionally

with letters to send to Congressional Representatives or Senators, but I have since realized there is a more efficient way for us to make our voices heard. Jessica Craven has a free subscription service called “Chop Wood Carry Water” that provides information about obnoxious legislation and suggested possible text for a phone call to Congressional offices. Her title refers to an old Buddhist story in which two monks, having achieved enlightenment, ask their teacher what do we do next. He replied, “Chop Wood, Carry Water,” meaning simply live your life. Jessica Craven’s “Chop Wood Carry Water” will send you free emails about ways you can influence elected representatives with a simple phone call and her optimistic. She also provides cheery encouragement that good things are happening and you have a right to be proud of your intentions.

Perhaps this is something we could do together at coffee hours, call and text and email in a group, so that one person’s good idea can feed everyone’s message of love and care. Once we are in our new place, we can do this more easily and throw in sandwiches and we have a party.

When we give from the heart, we model for others that we are not defined by someone else’s hostile rhetoric. Nonviolence is built on a foundation of love, which is now the very core of Unitarian Universalist beliefs. When we give from the heart, we model for others that freedom is still possible, that regardless of

social or political headwinds we are affirming our emotional freedom to be ourselves, to live out our high values.

You will still need the protections of those self-management skills: Find joy in the ordinary, don't fret over the small stuff, consider what you've left unresolved, set boundaries, step down media intake, practice going slow, etc. But now those defenses have a basis upon which they connect us with others. Those skills have a core of Love that helps us live calmly, reflectively engaged in community. We model for others and reinforce for ourselves that connection is important to us, that we can actually feel connected with others. We then will have preserved freedom and health for ourselves and each other.